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# ‘The Girl Is the Core of Life’ Social Reintegration, Communal Violence and the Sacred in Northern Uganda

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## **Abstract**

*This chapter explores diverse community perspectives related to girls and young women formerly associated with the Lord’s Resistance Army, some of whom returned with children, in particular focusing on the use of cultural resources in social reintegration. The methodology consisted of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with fifty participants—including Acholi Elders, Ajwakis (spiritual healers), local leaders and displaced never-abducted girls, women and men. A Grounded Theory analysis identified the following three categories; (1) Things Fall Apart—examining cultural constructions of ‘girlhood’ and the communal meanings of violence against girls, (2) Identity tensions presented by young mothers and their babies to the community of return, contributing to stigma enacted within specific social contexts and (3) The use of cultural resources in social reintegration. Culturally rooted community routines and practices are often overlooked but are central to a full understanding of social reintegration.*

## **Introduction**

Young women formerly associated with armed groups, in particular those who have returned with children born in captivity as a result of forced marriage have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group with regard to psychosocial reintegration (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Globally demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programming has traditionally underserved girls and young women (Keairns 2002; Verhey 2001) and young mothers have been found to have significant difficulties returning

to education and training when compared to childless formerly-associated peers (Annan et al, 2008). Academic discourses concerned with this population have examined explanations for girl soldiering (Shepler 2004; Brett and Specht 2004; Annan and Blattman, 2008, Carlson and Mazurana, 2008), recruitment patterns (Verhey 2001; Paez 2001; Keairns 2002; Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers 2008), experiences and roles within the fighting forces (Nordstrom 1997; Mazurana et al. 2002; Keairns 2002;) and reintegration processes (Veale 2003; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Jareg 2005; Honwana 2006; Wessells 2006; Veale and Stavrou 2007; Chrobok and Akutu 2008). Extensive regional survey data from northern Uganda (Survey of War Affected Youth, 2008) has indicated that female youth formerly-associated with the LRA have gone on to live relatively successful lives and are no more violent than their peers (Annan, Blattman, Carlson and Mazurana 2008). Studies focusing on formerly associated males found they vote in higher numbers and are twice as likely to become community leaders (Blattman 2008). Serious emotional distress and estrangement were found to be the exception rather than the norm among formerly associated girls and women, including long term abductees, forced wives, and forced mothers, prompting the authors to note that 'returned young women are strong and resilient, not traumatized pariahs' and that abduction experiences were poor predictors of need (Annan et al, 2008).

These positive outcomes should not contribute to assumptions that support is not required. Rather they are an indication of the social and developmental changes and transitions that can occur in the lives of young mothers and their children, and stimulate further questions about their agency, relationships and use of symbolic and cultural resources in mediating their own reintegration and that of their children. There are still concerns on the ground that a small number of girls and young women are experiencing sustained difficulties with reintegration. Recent surveys have found that a minority of formerly-associated females exhibit serious psychosocial reintegration difficulties, whether psychological distress or persistent community and family rejection (Annan et al. 2009). Ethnographic work emanating from these studies has explored how abduction experiences may exacerbate problems such as intimate partner violence, which emanate from wider structural issues (Annan and Brier 2010). It is clear that the dynamics of reintegration are far more complex than dichotomizing formerly abducted females as either 'traumatised' or 'resilient.' The authors of Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY) point out that the majority of formerly-associated females report serious family and community problems upon return, but are mostly accepted by their families, and relations improve further over time. We

explore reintegration as an ongoing relational process, whereby changes occur between people in specific social contexts.

Recent developments in cultural psychology avoid dichotomizing the individual from cultural and communal aspects of experience. If we see reintegration as a relational process, we also need to cast light on community perspectives. In this chapter, we explore the contribution of a socio-cultural perspective on how reintegration is done informally—how young women's families and communities respond within their own systems of knowledge and practice. Thus this research attempts to address the following question; how do members of formerly abducted girls' communities of origin make meaning of reintegration, experience challenges and actively respond to returned girls and young women and their children?

This paper employs a socio-cultural lens (Vygotsky 1962; Rogoff 1990; Wertsch 1998; Valsiner 2000) to explore community representations and narratives surrounding formerly abducted girls and their children in communities of return in Gulu and Kitgum. There have been recent calls within the literature for in-depth, culturally grounded research on reintegration as a social practice, informed by ethnographic and social psychological perspectives, particularly in Sierra Leone (Shepler 2004) and northern Uganda (Finnström 2008). We employ an analytical focus on cultural resources, a concept which draws on Vygotsky's notion of a cultural tool (Vygotsky 1978) and consists of material tools (cameras, soap) and symbolic tools (songs, stories, rituals), which mediate how we interpret the world and act in it. How do community members use cultural resources—stories, representations, images, rituals—to make meaning of and respond to returning girls and young women? The concept of mediation is central here, as our relationship to the world is mediated by cultural tools, both material and symbolic, which become, consequently, the forms through which experience takes shape. As Wertsch writes "to be human is to use cultural tools, or mediational means that are provided by a particular cultural setting." (2001).

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Participants were identified through local contacts, and asked if they would be interested in participating in the research. There were fifty participants in total, thirty-nine female and eleven male. The age range of participants was 18 to 65. Interviews were conducted in Gulu and Kitgum districts and all participants self-identified as Acholi. Interviews were conducted by appoint-

ment and usually took place in participants' homes in the villages or Internally Displaced Person's camps, while focus group discussions were carried out in a central outdoor meeting area in the IDP camps with one focus group with elders at the Paramount Chief's palace.

### *Procedure*

Selective sampling was used in order to explore a variety of community positions. Categories of respondents (e.g. Acholi elders, ajwakas, local leaders, groups of young women) were outlined with research assistants who were from the local area who then approached people fitting these descriptions and invited them to be involved in the research. In-depth interviews were employed with cultural informants such as Acholi Elders, Ajwakas (traditional healers), and the Camp Commandant of an Internally Displaced Persons camp and displaced young women. Focus group discussions were held with displaced young women, parents, Acholi Elders, local leaders and Ajwakas. Interviews and focus groups generally lasted 1.5 hours although there was an amount of variation in this dependant on the wishes of interviewees for example two interviews with Acholi Elders lasted over three hours. Interviews were structured around community-based social, spiritual and justice responses to social reintegration of girls and young women formerly associated with the LRA. A semi-structured interview schedule was used structured along thematic lines, as it allowed participants a great deal of flexibility in exploring and elaborating on divergent themes and ideas. In the interviews, the discussion often broadened to reflect on the endemic experiences of sexual violence and consider the experiences of never-abducted girls and young women. The interviews and focus groups were informed from a 'ground-up' approach and, in common with research within the grounded theory tradition, did not impose particular specific hypotheses on the interview situation from the outset.

Interviews were conducted by the first author through a local interpreter. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in English. Two research assistants were involved in this research, one male and one female, both of whom were trained by the first author and prior to any interviews were involved in in-depth discussions about topics of the study, research ethics and participated in role play interviews in order to identify any potential concerns and agree on culturally appropriate translations of key terms. The method of analysis was grounded theorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### *Ethics*

This project was informed at all stages by the primary guiding principle to

'do no harm.' All participants volunteered to be involved in the study, and were fully aware of their right to cease their participation at any time, withdraw their data or refuse to answer certain questions. A detailed informed consent process was undergone in Luo (the local language). Also, verbal consent procedures were in place whereby participants had the option to mark the form once it had been read and explained to them and have the signature witnessed by a third party. Participants were members of a war-affected population and as such present specific ethical concerns. This research was focused on cultural and community-based responses to the social reintegration of formerly-associated young women and their children, and thus did not focus on interviewees' personal experiences of the conflict. This stage of the research was concerned with local community responses to reintegration and no formerly abducted young women were interviewed. In some cases, individuals offered personal experiences or experiences of others in order to illustrate a point (as is common in Acholi oral histories and the tradition of the *wang oo*), space was given to do this without intrusive follow up questions.

### **Analysis**

Exploring people's uses of cultural tools in reintegration offers a new way of investigating socio-relational processes of change.

*Things Fall Apart—the role of community narratives, images and rumours in mediating reintegration processes.*

What are the narratives of reintegration? How do local people understand and make sense of returning girls and their children? Are these different from NGO narratives?

In an interview conducted between the first author and Acholi Elders in the Paramount Chief's Palace in Gulu in 2007, a Musee named Otim referred to the novel to evoke his sense of the *meaning* of the collective experiences of the Acholi. In discussing the reintegration of children born in the bush he referred to the Acholi customary law, which holds that children born outside of marriage belong to their maternal family and are treated the same as any other child in that family. He went on to say, "In a traditional Acholi setting no child is without a base. There is nothing like street child in Acholi, today I hope you have come across the book of Professor Chinua Achebe?" 'Things fall apart' I replied, 'Things fall apart,' he repeated softly, 'that is the real situation of Acholi today.' In this moment, Otim used Chinua Achebe's narrative to make meaning of his own. He situates the stories and the

suffering of the Acholi within a wider context of communal violence. The difficulties faced by returning young women and their children are thus understood as part of a wider story of oppression. Otim, like many other Acholi Elders I came to know well during my fieldwork, expressed a deep sense of loss and anxiety at the conditions of life during war, conditions he often perceived as chaotic and meaningless.

The meaning of these events, the violence and oppression enacted against the Acholi, is constructed through the appropriation and use of symbolic tools such as narratives (Vygotsky 1978). As Achebe himself writes “People create stories create people; or rather stories create people create stories.” Bits and pieces of the stories of others can be appropriated and used to create our own individual and collective life narratives, and help us to make meaning of ourselves, suffering and being in the world. This is reminiscent of Claude Levi-Strauss’ concept of *bricolage* to describe the way in which people use bits and pieces of the symbolic and the material they have available to them to confer meaning to events (Levi-Strauss, 1962). Thus people become authors of their own stories and fates. Community members likened the experiences of formerly abducted girls to those of other girls in the community—both groups experienced rape, poverty, displacement, hunger and the deaths of loved ones. One of the most common phrases used about abduction in northern Uganda was ‘It could happen to you’ indicating the universality of the experience.

One common image in participants’ narratives was the archetype of the ‘Acholi girl’ or ‘traditional girl’ and her safe, protected space at the centre of social and familial systems. This idea is elaborated by Okello, an Acholi Elder:

You see the girl is the core of life. Life is centred on the girl that is why they were treated special. One they bring in wealth, they are the people on which the whole life of the family is centred on the girl. You see much actually happened, as I was telling you these girls were removed sometimes in front of the family... They were taken away to the bush and a lot of things happened there, things that should never be happening.

The young girl seems to be a central figure in this collectively imagined community of ‘the life that should be living’ or ‘*piny maber*,’ a good life in an environment without extreme conflict. The representations of innocence and purity afforded to the image of the young girl may be equated with ideas of the purity or viability of the Acholi community itself. Nordstrom (1997) discusses how attacks upon girls may act as attacks upon the nation state. Thus an attack on the body of the girl becomes an attack on the ‘body politic.’ The LRA have articulated the aim of destroying the Acholi tribe and

replacing with a new Christian Acholi (LRA/M, n.d., cited in Finnström 2008). The rape of girls may be seen at once a pragmatic act—to create through forced pregnancy a 'new Acholi,' and to raise the necessary military capacity needed to fight the war, and also to create profound destruction, done with an aim of exerting control over the civilian population.

The rape of girls and women in the Internally Displaced Person's camps by the UPDF was also represented as a method of exerting power over the civilian population. As a young man in a displacement camp in Kitgum said "The army men rape the young girls because they have power over us. To show the men we are weak and cannot protect them." Thus attacks on girls may be also locally represented as attacks on the identity and self-determination of the clan or indeed the Acholi as a group. These ideas were illuminated by Otim, an Acholi Elder in Gulu, when discussing LRA violence:

Traditionally an Acholi man would be the last person who would be happy seeing his wife being abused or his daughter being abused. The way the women were raped, the way the daughters were raped in the presence of their parents, the men were very very hurt. In fact it is just a reflection, an indication or a confirmation by the perpetrator that the man was useless, because the impossible could happen in his presence. So the man, women should not take it that men didn't suffer, psychologically men suffered worst.

It is important to note here that there is significant disagreement as to the extent to which the rape of girls in the presence of family members has actually happened in northern Uganda, and this was in fact disputed within this interview. These kinds of war stories and rumours, particularly related to young girls or pregnant women (see for example Nordstrom 1997) exist within many cultures affected by armed conflict and contribute to collective and divergent narratives of terror, suffering and resistance.

What does this mean for reintegration? These participants framed girls' experiences of abduction and forced marriage within wider collective experiences of oppression. Girls are situated within family and community contexts rather than solely addressed as individual 'victims.' The 'victimhood' of formerly associate girls is likened to the experiences of never-abducted girls who have been raped or forced into marriage with UPDF soldiers. This questions dominant government and NGO narratives, which focus on children abducted by the LRA as the principal victims of the conflict. This focus of many interventions on a specific small group of victims/survivors, while politically prudent, does not address the victimisation experiences of the wider community. Understanding the experiences of girls and young women as communal events impacts local reintegration processes; interviews and discussions with community members evoked



narratives of shared suffering that fostered group cohesion to resist violence but also acknowledged that widespread victimization impacts on existing support structures.

Examining these narratives leads to a deeper understanding of the complex identity challenges presented by returning females. Community members are confronted with their inability to protect girls, initially from abduction and now from challenges upon return particularly displacement, extreme poverty and sexual violence. Community-based narratives consider government rapes and the effects of displacement on girls and women, in addition to LRA atrocities. The narratives reflect the place of returned girls within interdependent systems and evoke a broader conception of victimization than approaches solely focused on individual formerly abducted girls and young women.

*Identity tension—a situated exploration of stigma*

From a socio-cultural perspective, the concept of stigma may be understood as existing in the relational context between individuals participating in social practices rather than either in the social environment or in the individual. In order to understand and respond to stigma it is necessary to explore the immediate social contexts, cultural activities and social interactions within which it is used. Stigma may be more likely to occur within social interactions and contexts within which there is a fear of ‘contamination’, a high degree of uncertainty regarding the actor who is stigmatized and visibility or knowledge of the attribute that is stigmatized.

‘Stigma’ in the case of children returning with their mothers was not perceived by respondents to operate as a permanent mark—a scarlet letter or constant state of shame or rejection. Rather the dynamics of ‘stigma’ surrounding children seems to be context specific and originate from a combination of fear and attempts to regulate behaviour. In many interviews respondents stressed the positive aspects of such children. As Levi an Elder in Gulu described:

Many of these girls have children and they are coming home. A girl with a baby is more comforting to the parents. At least you know she has a baby, ok the father is not known so long as the boy or the child is healthy, quite a lot of them are taken care of by the parents. I have one here and I am looking after the child very well, she is already part of me.

Women participating in a focus group in Layibi also illustrated this point;

R. They are always kept in the same way. A typical Acholi do not segregate against children, whatever the case. People are more sensitive with them.

R. Maybe that girl has brought a child from a brilliant family to their family.

The collective identity of the Acholi as welcoming and caring for children is stressed here. This aspect of cultural identity was often invoked in discussions surrounding children born in captivity. Here this narrative serves a protective function in the lives of returned girls and their children as it reinforces relational systems of protection. Mothers participating in this focus group elaborated on this theme;

R. As a parent, being like that your daughter came back with a child so you have to praise God given that your child has come back. So you will not treat that child in any bad way because that child came from the bush or his father is still in the bush, you only take charge because that is a part of you. The only unfortunate thing is if by any chance the father is mad and lie madness can be inherited from father to child, then you will have to battle with the child. The girls did not go there because they wanted to but they were forced by circumstances. So you have to take these children like they were not born from the bush but were just born from home just like your own children. If you treat them well the child will grow up to be a responsible person who will take up responsibility of the home.

I. (interpreter) How about other community members?

R. Outside people like neighbours normally stigmatize these children and it is always common with children that are stubborn and when they have gone and done something wrong these children will be abused and references will normally be made of where they are born or where they came from.

R. So if a child goes to the neighbours' place and is playing with their child and then suddenly hits that child from nowhere, the mother of that child will come out and start saying 'I am tired of these sort of children, who were born from the bush, go back to your home.' So this depends normally on the child. If the child can listen the stigmatisation of the child is not normally there. But if the child is stubborn the stigmatisation of the child is a must.

I. If that child is stubborn in the family, would people ever refer to the way he was born?

R. Yes if the child is being stubborn, people will become annoyed and they will mention the way he was born, they will tell him even to go to the father.

Group discussion with Megos in Gulu district.

This rich narrative illustrates communal perceptions surrounding returning children and indicates a number of divergent positions. The narrative of the child as part of the family is counter-pointed with fears related to the ‘stranger’ father. The potential of the child to ‘take up responsibility in the home’ indicates an acknowledgement of the child’s place as part of the family and their right to engage fully in familial life and practices—the ‘possible self’ of the child born in captivity as a committed family member is invoked. Conversely, fears of inherited dangers, as demonstrated through unsanctioned or non-normative behaviours such as madness, aggression and stubbornness, create shaming responses within the community. Stigmatisation here is linked to the breaking of norms or misbehaviour, in terms of teaching the child, and is described as an active, malleable force—with a regulatory or ‘taming’ function—rather than a static ‘mark’ permanently affecting a child born in captivity.

Changing relational contexts were linked to altered identities of children. In cases of girls returning with children and then remarrying the relationship between the child and the new husband was considered by community members as problematic. Displaced young women in Gulu discussed a number of cases whereby a new husband would become threatened by the presence of another man’s child in the family. In families of some young mothers, both formerly associated and not, the husband would see the child as a stranger to him, which in these participants’ experience could lead to abuse of these children.

He won’t want to see the eyes of the child there. Only you and maybe the child he is going to have with you.

Rebecca, displaced girl, Gulu district

Acholi customary law would indicate that a child born outside of marriage would become part of the mother’s family. However, within changing family structures and new relationships the child’s place becomes less secure. This was said to result in the separation of mother and child although there were cases cited where the new husband would accept and care for the child. Within interviews and discussions local leaders, mothers and displaced young women cited numerous cases where mother and child were separated, due to remarriage.

No man wants to take care of another man’s kids. Because they are also poor they can not afford so much and also he will look at those kids as strangers to him not his own.

Tandi, displaced girl, Gulu district.

What may be distinctive here are the shades of difference between acceptance and belonging. If the child 'misbehaves' or displays non-normative behaviour such as aggression or commits minor infractions their possible identity as a 'child from the bush', a 'rebel child' or a 'stranger' may be invoked. In the years to come, issues over land rights, or interpersonal issues such as relationships or conflicts may result in these alternative identities being brought into the open and belonging contested.

You know in Acholi, in all clans of Acholi, sometimes you get people from other clans. Maybe they have problems there, like murder...and then you run, you come and join another clan and so forth. Now one can stay very comfortably in that clan but maybe after some time someone will say ah no he does not belong to that you know... He came from oh somewhere... and out of anger someone can say a lot of abusive words, isolating you. But in general Acholi are very very good, at harbouring differences and seeing some way...

...

L. Maybe the two girls will be loving the same boy you know? And one will say 'oh you don't belong to this clan (laughs)'. These things will then come out.

I. If the child is with his mother's family, would he inherit in the normal way although his father was from the bush?

L. If he has been living there and is part of that family he has that right to inherit property. He is already a part of that family.

I. If the child ever did something wrong would the circumstances of his birth ever be brought up

R. That will also come out, if the child misbehaves, that will also come out. Yeah in case that child wants to take over everything from his family. That child wants to take over everything, everything in that family, leaving other children in that family that is where the past will come out. Because those other children will even do it saying 'You have just come to this family, you are not really part of this family,' that is when it will come out.

I. So family disputes over land and things like that...

R. Yeah

Levi, Acholi Elder, Gulu district

The idea of 'stigma' is explored here as context bound and used in specific social relational contexts through the words and actions utilized by other community members to temporarily exclude returned children. Lawrence describes how in times of interpersonal difficulty, such as a conflict over romantic relationships or land, rivals would invoke the child's identity

as ‘other’ in order to attack their social status and right to claim resources within the clan. Thus stigma is a tool at the disposal of other community members should they need to compete as to birthright—full belonging within the clan—which the child does not fully possess. This is likened to the experience of those who come to the Acholi from different tribes, indicating that ‘stigma’ here is more about belonging and social status within clan structures than about the specific circumstances of a child’s birth. With regard to the legal rights of these children, particularly land rights and inheritance, ideas of belonging or entitlement are tied closely with tribal or kinship structures.

In a focus group with never abducted girls in Amuru, girls described the specific difficulties facing their peers who had been formerly associated with the LRA. A recurring theme throughout these participants’ narratives was a lack of control in sexual relationships, and this was discussed with regard to formerly abducted and never abducted girls and young women alike. The key issue of sexual relationships requires detailed exploration, as if the experiences of young women within the LRA, particularly forced marriage and sexual violence, are to be addressed within healing or justice fora, it is essential to also address the continuing victimisation of female youth upon return and the shared experiences of never abducted girls. This is necessary in order to avoid privileging one group of survivors (or rather one period of victimization—as formerly-associated girls and young women often contend with abuse upon return) and rather to address ongoing collective experiences of sexual violence. Displaced young women, young men, parents, elders and local leaders all spoke of endemic sexual violence in the IDP camps and perpetrated by UPDF soldiers. In discussions surrounding abducted girls specifically, never abducted peers stressed the continuing victimization upon return ‘home’ particularly surrounding factors constraining the agency of young women, and young mothers in particular.

So the parents will be there, the parents are giving her some assistance they are giving her shelter and her kids, giving her feeding, clothing maybe a little of education, because we can put that the majority are poor so the parents cannot afford education for these kids at a higher level, and her she cannot do anything, say even if she is taken to a tailoring course, she will see in a day tailoring she earns 500s she will see that there is no future for her sending her kids to school. So with that she can easily be tempted to become a prostitute to just be going walking from a man to a man, from a man to a man.

Tandi, displaced girl, Gulu district

In social contexts of extreme poverty the necessity of an independent income is stressed, particularly if the girl or young woman has children to support. The lack of options available to young mothers with regard to income generation and the extremely low returns on activities such as tailoring were understood to lead to a reliance on transactional sex for material needs, with abuse in sexual relationships a significant theme. The economic realities of young mothers' lives are central to their ability to assume positive social roles in the community. Participants stressed the lack of opportunities available to low income young mothers, whose marginal place in the community is both a cause and a consequence of their inability to provide for their children financially. These issues apply not only to formerly-associated young women, but also to the many other young girls and women who were raising children alone. These new family units were said to be particularly vulnerable, as they did not fit within local practices governing the division of labour, as Alice, an ajwaka in Gulu outlined, in relation to young women formerly associated with the LRA.

As a result life becomes very difficult for them, even basic things become a problem, like if children and men take those responsibilities it would be ok.

In contexts where traditional support structures are under extreme stress, the economic vulnerability of young mothers may create a sense of tension within the community. Stigma may be enacted in these relationships as a result of daily frustrations and pressures, rather than as necessarily a consequence of abduction experiences themselves. These issues are central to effective reintegration programming, whereby stigma may be dealt with more effectively through income generation activities and by drawing on local resources for change rather than standard NGO 'sensitization' models.

This theme explores the dynamics and mechanisms of stigma; a key distinction here is that stigma is enacted within a particular social context, cultural activities and social relationships, rather than existing within the individual. The mechanisms of stigma are malleable and are closely connected with fears and anxieties within the community which stem from spiritual issues and fears of contamination, changes in social norms surrounding gender roles and ideas of the unknown surrounding violence witnessed or perpetrated and the affect of this on the peace of mind of girls and children.

#### *Cultural Resources in mediating reintegration*

Participants drew on a wide repertoire of cultural tools in formulating responses to formerly abducted girls and their children. These included

counseling and storytelling, herbal medicine, rituals such as *nnyono tonngweno*, *moyo piny* and *tumu*, engaging formerly-associated girls and young women in communal practices such as cooking or cultivation, meetings between families in cases of forced marriage and putting protections in place against victimization. For the purposes of this paper we reflect on some discussions with groups of formerly-associated young women's never-abducted peers in Internally Displaced Person's Camps. These participants identified multiple strategies for social change and transformation.

Participants explored mechanisms of protection of formerly-associated girls and young women and the need for community based local support for victims of rape and sexual violence upon return. A discussion of the corruption and inadequacy of police services highlighted the need for grassroots contacts and links for girls. This was seen as a vital resource in reintegration, improving the formerly associated girl's well being and emotional security, as a displaced young woman explains.

Because when they see that they cannot be abused sexually, emotionally, they will see that the world is also accepting them. You see? So in spite of what happened to me, the world also recognises me as someone important because the world is there to protect my right, you see? the world is there to protect my feelings, my interests. So whoever comes and abuses me I still have a refuge, if you come and abuse me I will always have somewhere to turn to.

Participants stressed the importance of engaging formerly-associated girls and young women in communal practices. The participation of returned girls in shared activity with other girls their own age and particularly with women elders such as megos and aunties was described as a vital resource in social reintegration.

Because elders will also be very important particularly women, mothers, these mothers will be very important in teaching them cooking, to make their home, that is very important because we know that in Acholi a nice girl, a good girl will always be loved to be married by anyone, she will always know how to cook. So they will teach them how to cook, how to be cooking this traditional food, they will teach them how to behave in the home as a mother.. I believe that will also have an impact on them, as a mother you have to be clean, weed your garden if it's there, do things at the right time, don't bark at kids, you see?

Linking formerly-associated girls and young women to female support systems is done here through shared practice. The formerly-associated young mother is engaged in a relational process whereby the elder as an expert guides her through the acquisition of locally valued skills and behaviours. This role of elders and family members was also stressed in providing

relationship advice and counseling. This was seen to be particularly important in cases where formerly-associated girls were in relationships with boys who had also been abducted, and participants stated that discussions with formerly abducted boys and men were needed to deal with the problems of continuing sexual or domestic violence upon return to civilian life.

Because to me personally [author's name] I say that these people need to be re-educated as to how to handle a human being, how to handle a wife, how to handle a child, how to handle my children, how to handle my sisters and the entire community I live in, how to handle human beings generally. Much as I do agree that we as human beings have weaknesses, but should be at a normal level, not abnormal the one that they have been doing in the bush.

Community responses to formerly abducted girls acknowledge the complexity of social reintegration and the many intersecting issues that further complicate it. A relational approach allows for an exploration of these issues in greater depth as they are enacted within the specific social contexts of northern Uganda.

### **Conclusion**

While recent contributions to the literature have illuminated the resilience and strength of formerly abducted girls and young women, there remains a gap in our understanding of how reintegration processes work in families and communities. The socio-cultural approach explored here allows for the complexity and contestation within reintegration as a relational process. In this paper we focused on the identity challenges presented by returning girls and their children to the communities of return, resulting in enacted stigma within specific social contexts. There are concerns raised on the ground that while children born in captivity are accepted by families and communities, there do exist moments of tension, that may reoccur in the years to come. We also explored community members' responses to mediating stigma through facilitating participation of young women and their children in valued social practices. Culturally rooted community routines and practices are often overlooked but they are central to a full understanding of social reintegration.

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